

General Recall Dec 7 1978

Julio DeCastro

The Rescue

by Blake Clark

Permission to publish this excerpt of the book, "Remember Pearl Harbor", 1943 was granted by the publishers, HARPER & BROTHERS. It is the story of the heroism of the rescuers of the trapped men of the OKLAHOMA. It is also the story of the effort of one man in particular, Julio DeCastro, a leading man Caulker-Chipper who is now a member of our Association.

OUT IN PEARL HARBOR, soon after the second attack, the OKLAHOMA had settled on its side, lying like a great whale, almost totally submerged. Some members of a rescue party in a motor launch passing near the great hulk happened to hear the faint sound of tapping coming from somewhere in the bowels of the capsized ship. There were men, alive, trapped in the battleship! This was reported to yard officers at eleven o'clock in the morning and immediately a crew of workers with acetylene cutters was dispatched.

They opened holes in the outer shell astern and amidships trying to get thru. Amidships, they cut thru the hull into a fire room where they had heard voices and knew the imprisoned men were still alive. After several hours of grueling work it was found that the danger from fire and excessive smoke was so great that the acetylene cutting method had to be abandoned.

Julio DeCastro, Hawaiian born, a master "leading-man" caulker and chipper, took out with a crew of experts with pneumatic cutting equipment - a slower but safer method. They, twenty-one in all, went aft and drilled a small test hole. Fresh water under high pressure spurted out, drenching the workmen. They had luckily drilled into a fresh water tank, a good place to launch the drilling thru to the men inside.

They began with renewed energy to cut out a hole large enough to admit them to the tank. It was dark by now. The ARIZONA still burning, illuminated the entire harbor silhouetting the crew on the hull of the ship and lighting up their work for them.

About nine o'clock anti-aircraft guns from all over the harbor opened up on a lone Japanese plane which had apparently missed its carrier and had been left behind. For an hour the flak from the anti-aircraft guns filled the sky. It shot all around DeCastro and the crew at work, but they disregarded their own danger.

They only hoped that the men caught inside were not suffocating, but they knew that water was probably rising in the compartments. When the anti-aircraft fire got too hot around the workmen's heads, they flattened out against the exposed hull for a minute, with nothing but their prayers to protect them.

The drilling of the hole finished, more precious time was used in pumping the water out of the storage tank.

When most of it had been pumped out, DeCastro and two others dropped down into it. There they had a second stroke of luck. Right below them was a manhole. That meant they could use that opening and not be forced to spend valuable time in drilling another man-sized hole.

The manhole lid could not be raised from their side, but by drilling a small hole in just the right place, DeCastro was able to put his arm thru undo the hatch from the other side - and lay it open. He flashed a light thru the aperture into the next compartment. It was dry and painted white.

This was a void, and he knew that on the other side of it they would find the men who had been signalling.

They dropped down into the chasm and found themselves standing on a deck. They searched until they found another hatch, knelt close to it and shouted. Someone on the other side shouted back - shouted with a joy that was good to hear.

"Are you all right?" DeCastro cried.

"Yeah, so far, but the water is coming up faster now! It's up to our waists already!" one man cried back.

Other men shouted, "For God's sake hurry up!" "Cut us out!" "Burn thru this hatch!"

DeCastro calmed them. "Keep steady, boys, and listen to what I am going to tell you: Now, just one of you, one who is strong and well -- you do all the talking. The rest of you keep quiet and don't lose your heads!"

The spirit of the men was inspiring. It was early Monday morning. For twenty-four hours they had been in that black horror with out light, food, sleep, or any assurance that help was coming. Yet after the first excited outburst they quieted down and followed directions.

Instructions had to be obeyed to the split second. As DeCastro and his men opened the hull, pressures inside were constantly changing. The air pressure had kept the water down and prevented the boys inside from drowning, but now that the rescue crew was letting out air which released the pressure, the water inside the hull would rise fast.

Finally the last dogs were off and the last hatch thrown open. Six trapped seamen came rushing out of their prison, naked as the day they were born. In their frantic scramble they knocked DeCastro down. He floundered in the water, but it was a pleasure for him. He thoroly enjoyed seeing those young men rush out of their black hell hole. It was six o'clock, Monday morning.

The rescuers heard more tapping it came from behind the far bulk head the compartment they a just DeCastro, followed by two helpers climbed into the compartment from which they had just freed the six sailors, waded to yelled back, "Hurry up, cant you? The water's coming up fast. Some of the short g the bulkhead opposite, and shouted. An answering sailor yells back "we have to hang on to the overhead in here!"

DeCastro said he never knew how slow chipping a hole could be. The water steadily rose in his compartment. He knew it was rising on the sailors on the other side, altho they never complained. When the hole was out thru, and light again shone in the pitch blackness of the prison, the water swirled around the men's anppits. Eleven men streaked out of the hole like bolts of lightning.

By this time DeCastro had had enough -- the water was pouring in on them.

"Let's get out, fast!" he shouted to his men.

"I can't find my chipper," one objected.

"To hell with that chipper and everything else! Let's get out of here!" DeCastro yelled.

As the last workman crawled thru the hatch to safety, the compartment was completely filled with tons of heavy seawater. It rose all the way to the ceiling.

The OKLAHOMA is a big ship, and men were caught in more than one section of it. The wary rescuers reached eight more sailors after boring thru an oil tank. DeCastro and two others dropped down onto the floor of the fume permeated tank. As they crossed the slippery floor, one of the men heard knocking under his feet. De-Castro yelled thru a covered manhole, "Take patience now, we'll get you all out. There's a lot of pressure in there, so watch your ears. I'm going to release the pressure before I open this manhole!"

"OkAy, okay," answered the sailors.

"Now listen, when I get this hatch open, the weakest and injured should come out first. The strongest should come out last."

"Okay, okay."

There was a testing hole in the man hole cover and DeCastro opened it, covering it tightly with his hands to ease the pressure off slowly.

When the pressure was off he shouted to the trapped men telling them to undo the manhole cover.

And did they go to work on it?

They leaped out in a hurry, also unencumbered with clothes after thirty-six hours in their dungeon. One had a broken finger, another a broken arm.

"What time is it?" one asked.

"Monday."

"Hell, I lost a day," he answered. "I thought it was still Sunday!"

In all, thirty-two men were saved from the rising water in the capsized OKLAHOMA; one rescue crew penetrated one hundred and fifty feet into the hull to free the trapped sailors.

Two, the last to be liberated, were released from the forward section of the hull about one o'clock Tuesday.

It was seven o'clock Monday night when DeCastro and his crew of civilian heroes got back to their shop in the Navy Yard. DeCastro changed clothes. He was all but exhausted from more than twenty-four hours of strenuous, nerve-racking work. He was hungry, and eager to get home.

A man in overalls came up to him and held out a piece of paper.

"Hey, why didn't you fill out this overtime slip?"

DeCastro looked at him and all he could say was, "Christamighty!"

Then, because buses could not open at night in the blackout, and because he had no other means of transportation, Julio DeCastro walked five miles thru the darkened streets to his home.

Heroic Rescue Revealed

PEARL HARBOR, Hawaii, (U.P.)

—An all-night struggle by the light of a flaming battleship led to the rescue of 32 sailors trapped in the capsized U. S. S. Oklahoma last Dec. 7, the navy disclosed Wednesday in issuing citations for heroic conduct.

The story came out as 20 civilian navy yard workers and one naval officer were honored "for most efficient work with utter disregard for personal safety."

The men were members of a crew which manned pneumatic equipment for cutting through the sides and partitions of the Oklahoma while anti-aircraft guns fired at the Japanese attackers. The burning U. S. S. Arizona provided light during part of the dangerous mission.

Julio DeCastro, Honolulu-born worker in charge of the crew, told the story of how the pneumatic equipment was brought into action when sounds of tapping were heard from the Oklahoma. Work with acetylene cutters was ordered stopped because of the fire nearby.

"It was night then," DeCastro said in describing the drilling of the first test hole in the Oklahoma.

"The Arizona was still burning—it threw light on us—as we worked. For an hour there was anti-aircraft firing all over the place . . . we'd flatten out against the hull and hope nothing hit us . . ."

He told of pumping out the ship's fresh water tank, dropping through an opening and finding a man-hole — "our first lucky break."

He told of opening the hatch and peering into a white void out of which came the shouts of men.

"Boy, did that sound good. Those sailors in there shouting like hell," DeCastro said.

They shouted that the water was up to their waists; that they were all right; but "for God's sake hurry up."

"I said, 'now just one of you who's strong and well do the talking and the rest just keep quiet and keep your heads' . . . Say, those sailors were swell."

The story from there on was one of complete co-operation by the sailors who complied with instructions for opening the hatch and finally "piling out of there naked as the day they were born." It was 6 a. m. Monday.

But only six of the trapped men had escaped then. One of those rescued told of hearing other tapings and DeCastro's crew set to work again.

"When we finally got a hole through . . . 11 men came out . . . like a streak of lightning. Believe me we had to hurry to get out of that place. The water was up to the armpits. As we crawled through the hatch, the compartment was completely flooded . . . A lot of air pressure had kept the water down—that's why the sailors were not drowned."

But there were still more. They were discovered in another compartment and after a hole

had been cut in a nearby oil tank, DeCastro heard tapping from the opposite side of the manhole.

A sailor shouted, "Okay, but the water is coming up in here. Some of the short loys have to hang to the overhead," DeCastro said.

"I told them, 'You fellows be patient now and we'll get you all out.'"

The crew then released the air pressure, the trapped sailors opened the manhole cover, and rushed out. There were eight of them, all naked, one with a broken finger and another with a broken arm.

"I asked the last one," DeCastro continued, "if he knew of any more in that section of the ship. He said no—and asked if it were still Sunday."

That made 25 rescued. Another crew rescued seven others.